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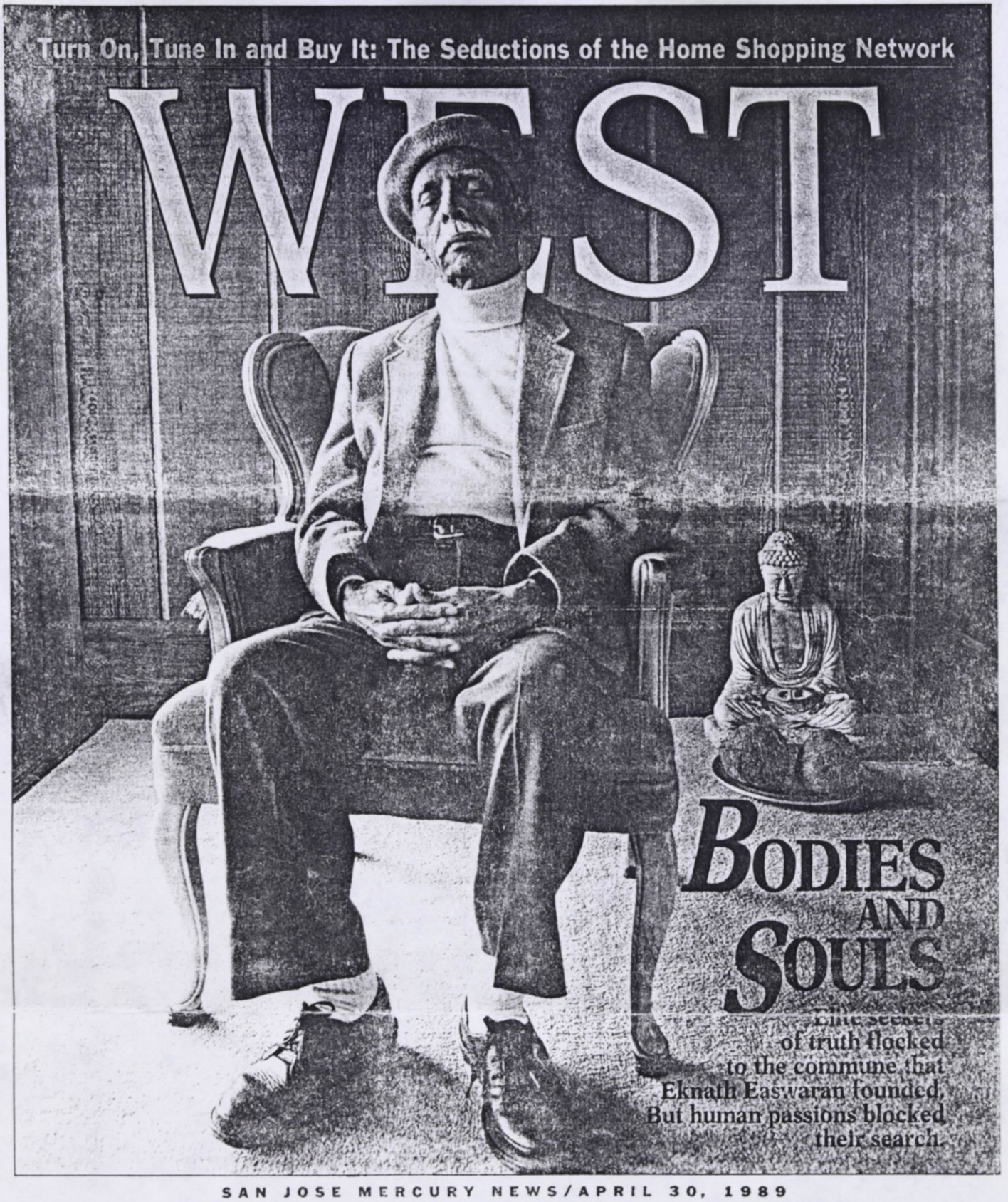
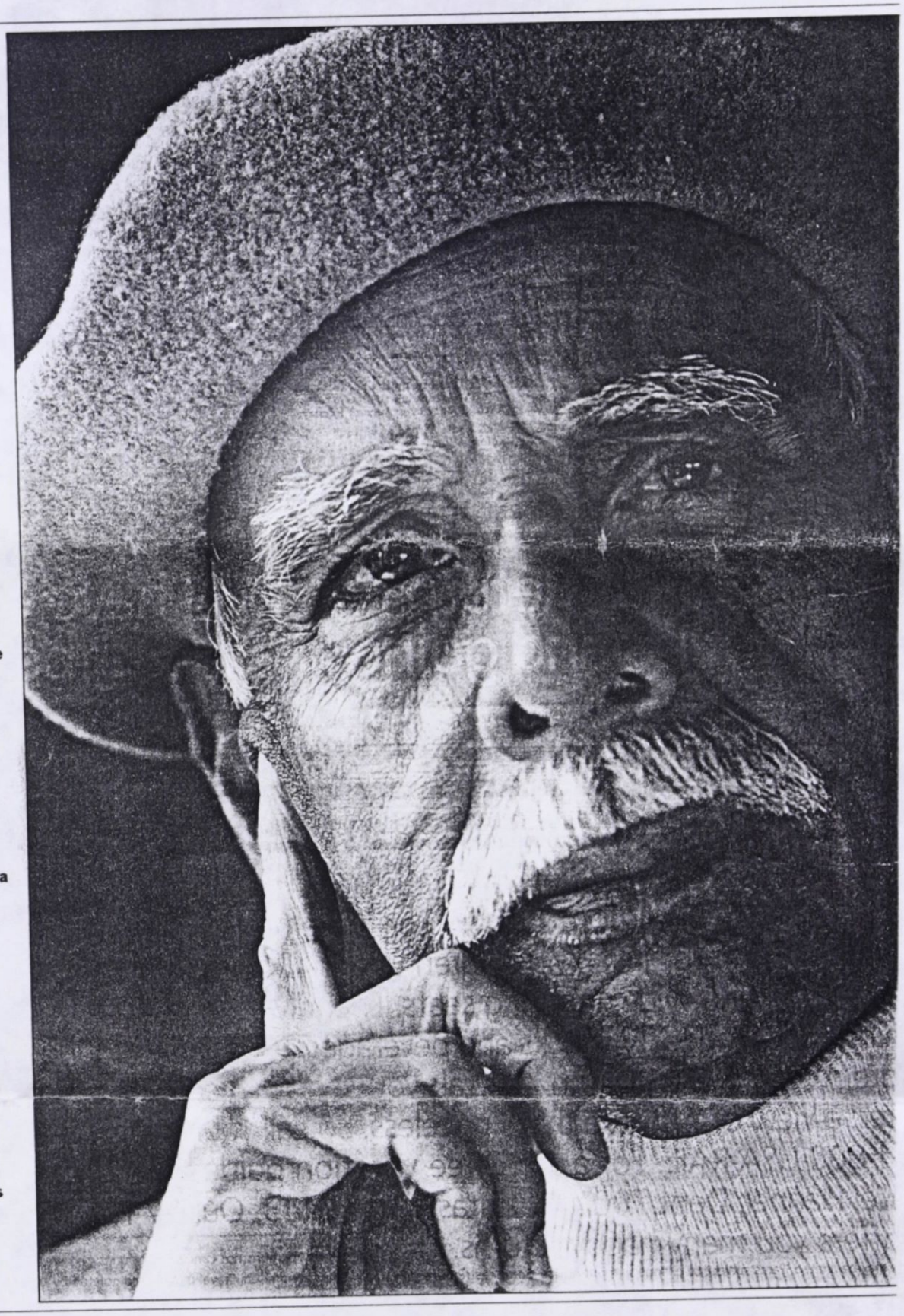


BODIES AND SOULS

Little secrets of truth flocked to the commune that Eknath Easwaran founded. But human passions blocked their search.

SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS/APRIL 30, 1989



Peace must come from the inside, says Easwaran, who has taught youthful seekers to control their thoughts through meditation. After nearly 20 years, peace is still a light at the end of the tunnel.

Photographs by Tom Van Dyke

The commune known as Ramagiri attracted articulate and well-educated seekers of truth. For a long time it succeeded where other attempts to join East and West had failed. But it came apart amid charges that its founder, Eknath Easwaran, was using his spiritual power in very earthly ways.

A SPLIT AT THE RAZOR'S EDGE

By John Hubner

I really want to see you, but it takes so long, my Lord.

—George Harrison, "My Sweet Lord"

THIS STORY ABOUT SEARCHING FOR GOD BEgins in a place he has blessed with great beauty, the green hills that roll up from the sea in north Marin County. Nearly 20 years ago, a small group of seekers went there with hammers and nails and transcendent ideas and built an *ashram*, a "forest academy." They were followers of an Indian spiritual master named Eknath Easwaran, but what they were doing was uniquely American.

America is the land where people try to create heaven on earth. The Pilgrims came to erect a "city on a hill" that would shine like a beacon through a dark world. The Methodists, the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Rajneeshi and countless others have all tried to do the same thing. Indeed, the 254 acres Easwaran's followers bought in Marin had belonged to a Catholic seminary. They renamed them Ramagiri, "hills of joy."

These seekers were among the best and the brightest of the generation that came of age in the 1960s, veterans of the Free Speech and anti-war movements, college students and freshly minted Ph.D.s, ex-hippies whose final revelation on LSD was that you can't find God by swallowing a chemical.

"In the summer of '67, I worked on an anti-Vietnam War newsletter that fell apart because nobody could get along," says Laurel Robertson. "It was devastating. If a great cause can't bind people together, what can? I started going to hear Easwaran speak. From him I learned that peace has to come from inside. He taught me that love is a skill that can be learned."

Easwaran was one of the least pretentious, most grounded of all the spiritual teachers who opened shops in Berkeley in the late '60s. Raised in a prosperous matriarchal family in a small village in South India, Easwaran fell in love with English literature as a boy. He went on to get a Ph.D. in English and become chairman of the English department at an Indian university. He came to Berkeley in 1959 on a Fulbright fellowship and stayed to teach meditation. He did not present himself as a holy man. To Mary Lee Cole, who had just earned a Ph.D. in education, he said, "I'm a teacher, just like you. I want to teach the spiritual wisdom of India, which I've verified through my own small experiences. You can help me build a bridge between East and West." Cole joined Easwaran at Ramagiri.

The 50 people who formed the Ramagiri core followed the trail into the unconscious blazed by Indian sages. The *Upanishads* warn, "Sharp like a razor's edge, the sages say, is the path to Reality, difficult to traverse." But the seekers had no fears. Easwaran was the rarest of all men, a genuine spiritual master, an *illumined* man. He would keep them from falling off the razor's edge.

How do you tell a real guru from a phony? 'The student is responsible for making sure that what the teacher says is reflected in the way he lives,' Easwaran says. 'Observation is the best way to find out. . . . I give people the same time to observe me very carefully, to test me very carefully."

EASWARAN, 78, IS SITTING AT THE HEAD OF A table in the beautiful dining hall at Ramagiri, a small, striking man with dark brown eyes, light brown skin, a snow-white mustache and white hair that is partly hidden by a gray beret that matches his Nehru jacket. He speaks slowly and carefully and has an Indian accent.

"The student is responsible for making sure that what the teacher says is reflected in the way he lives," Easwaran says, responding to the question, "How do you tell a real guru from a phony?" "Observation is the best way to find out. I take a long time to decide to take on the responsibility of guiding people on the spiritual path. I give people the same time to observe me very carefully, to test me very carefully."

"Do you look forward to those tests?" he is asked.

A smile crosses his lips. "So far, I haven't failed," he says in a chipper voice. The 10 students who are sitting around the table break into laughter. Easwaran waits for the laughter to subside, then continues. "I live in a glass case here, all 24 hours a day. I work 365 days a year without a vacation. I need only a few hours of sleep at night. My mind is not upset by anything; my nervous system is not upset by anything. I am not afraid of stress. I have no desire for personal profit; I have no desire for personal prestige, so nobody can manipulate me. All my talent and training are in trust for the benefit of all."

Easwaran went through a spiritual crisis in his early 40s. "I had tasted all the success that an Indian could want," he told his biographers. "Then, everything began to turn to dust. In time,

THE HARD WORK OF MEDITATION

THE VEHICLE THAT CARRIES EXPLORers into the canyon of the unconscious is meditation. The heart beats, the mind thinks, jumping from thought to thought like a nervous parakeet. To learn to control it through meditation may be the hardest work a human being can do. Try to sit and focus completely on your breathing, which is what the Buddha did. It'll be two seconds before thoughts are flying around your head. Two of Easwaran's students, Rick Flinders and Rod Weaver, went through medical school while meditating at Ramagiri. Both say meditation is harder and demands more discipline than medical school.

The meditation techniques Eknath Easwaran teaches are neither Hindu or Buddhist, they are universal, drawing from all the world's great religions. His students select a spiritual passage from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Dharmapada*, from the Bible or from great mystics such as St. Francis of Assisi. They repeat the passage over and over, concentrating on it, gently dismissing ideas that fly in and try to roost in consciousness like pigeons on a building.

During the day and when falling asleep, Easwaran's students repeat a *mantram*—usually called mantra by Westerners—a holy name. A mantra can be "Rama, Rama, Rama," which Mahatma Gandhi used, or it can be "Hail Mary," or "Jesus," or "Allah," or the Jews' *"Barukh attah Adonai,"* "Blessed art thou, O Lord." Easwaran compares the mantra to the rod an elephant keeps curled in his trunk going through a village in India. Without the rod, the elephant would pluck a bunch of bananas from a street vendor here and a couple of coconuts there. Without the mantra, the mind wanders like an elephant's trunk.

"We don't think our thoughts; our thoughts think us," Easwaran says.

According to mystics, the seeker who has learned to control his thoughts and explore his unconscious through meditation makes several important discoveries. First he learns that he is not his body. The body is like a suit of clothes that is shed when it is worn out. Then he learns that he is not his mind. There is something deeper in us that enables us to control our thoughts so that they don't think us, we think them. Instead of being wracked by anger, lust, greed, envy or any of the seven deadly sins, the successful seeker can kick them out of his head and tell them not to return.

If we are not our bodies and our minds, then what are we? The mystics' answer is, part of a divine whole. God is within and all around us. The spark of the divine that is within us Hindus call the *atman*, Christians the soul.

It is one thing to know this intellectually. It is quite another to actualize it, which is the goal of meditation and takes many years. Or, if you believe in reincarnation, many lifetimes. Coming face to face with the divine is called *samadhi*, *satori*, *nirvana*, illumination, enlightenment, the Kingdom of Heaven within. It occurs first in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, when Krishna, the supreme lord of the universe, shows his true Self to Arjuna, a kind of Hindu Everyman:

"If a thousand suns were to rise in the heavens at the same time, the blaze of their light would resemble the splendor of that supreme spirit. . . . Filled with amazement, his hair standing on end in ecstasy, Arjuna bowed before the Lord."

—*J.H.*

nothing could satisfy me, not even literature. I began to ask, 'Who am I? Where do I come from? What is the purpose of life?' " He began meditating and made rapid progress, supposedly breaking through to *samadhi* on the Blue Mountain in India in 1959. (*Samadhi*, or enlightenment, occurs when meditation becomes so deep, the spiritual seeker discovers and unites with God at the same moment.) That same year, he came to America on his Fulbright.

One of the first times Easwaran taught meditation was in a metaphysical bookstore in San Francisco in 1960. The large audience was so interested in what he was saying about Eastern religions, he decided to tell them how to meditate. When he had finished, Easwaran invited everyone to give meditation a try and closed his eyes. When he opened them half an hour later, there were only three people left in the store: Easwaran, his wife and the owner.

But Easwaran began to attract students who had read about meditation and wanted to learn how to do it. He founded the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Berkeley in 1960 and eventually taught a four-credit meditation course at UC-Berkeley. He returned to India in 1962 and came back to Berkeley in 1965 to become a full-time spiritual teacher. Easwaran moved his ashram to the pastoral setting in Marin in 1970.

THE EARLY YEARS AT RAMAGIRI WERE LIKE the beginning of a great journey, full of high spirits and good omens. The seekers built living quarters, started a goat herd, planted trees and a fine garden. They were acutely aware that although *ashrams* exist so that like-minded people can retreat and help one another on the road to enlightenment, the retreat from the world should be only partial. The Buddha talked about the "Middle Path" somewhere between a very worldly place like Wall Street and a ledge in the Himalayas, and Gandhi continually stressed that spiritual principles must be tested in the world.

The seekers decided to reach out to the world by establishing a press to print books written by Easwaran. The Bible says seek and you shall find, and Jim Wehlage did, discovering an old printing press moldering in a garage in Berkeley. Wehlage rebuilt the press, and it became the foundation of Nilgiri Press, which eventually published some of the most lovingly done books in America. Printed on acid-free paper that will not yellow or crumble, sewn so they will not come apart, Easwaran's translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Dharmapada*, and the *Upanishads* are crystal clear and accompanied by commentaries that make the teachings come to life. His small book *Meditation* may be the best introduction to the discipline ever done.

A vegetarian diet is part of the spiritual path in part because Hindus believe that an animal dies in an act of violence, and when you eat its flesh, you absorb that karma; and in part because a vegetarian diet makes sense ecologically—people are cutting down the world's rain forests to raise cattle. Women in the commune began to experiment with vegetarian recipes and to test the results on the seekers. They published the recipes in a book called *Laurel's Kitchen*, named after Laurel Robertson, that has since sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

But behind the bright eyes and rosy cheeks of the seekers, all was not well. In India, it traditionally takes 12 years of intense meditation and study in an ashram to reach *samadhi*. As the years went by, Easwaran's students increased the time they meditated until they reached four hours a day. None of them reached *samadhi*. They studied sacred scriptures and mystics from all religions, ate their vegetarian meals, and nobody reached *samadhi*.

One day, Easwaran said that following the spiritual path in America is obviously much harder than it is in India, where the tradition is thousands of years old. Here it might take students 25 years to reach *samadhi*. Later, he increased it to 50 years. Then he began suggesting that they would all return in as many lifetimes as it took to finish the work.

Some of the disciples began to doubt. Were they really learning anything, were they actually making spiritual progress? Had Easwaran actually experienced *samadhi*? If intense meditation was so beneficial, why weren't people at Ramagiri happier?

They were told that doubt was destructive. Easwaran was guiding them on the most difficult journey of all. To question him was to break the bond of faith and fall off the razor's edge. They buried their doubts and kept meditating.

The commune's bread, baked by Laurel Robertson, has become famous through the best-selling book, *Laurel's Kitchen.*

IN 1983, TWO OF EASWARAN'S CLOSEST FEMALE disciples announced that, for several years, Easwaran had been making sexual advances. The women did not accuse Easwaran, who had taken a vow of celibacy, of trying to have intercourse; they said he had repeatedly tried to fondle them. Doubts that had been burning like pilot lights deep within some disciples ignited to full flame.

"It took something that strong to shock me awake," says David Cole, who followed Easwaran from 1967 to 1983 and is now working in publishing. "Until then, if you weren't making progress, the problem was within you. Suddenly I realized Easwaran was deluded about who he was and what his capacities were. We'd been manipulated by promises and threats and a sense of dependency that had been carefully cultivated."

The commune split into the loyalists and the doubters, sometimes within the same family. When one woman described her spiritual confusion to her husband, he put his hands over his ears and ran out of the room rather than hear her doubts about Easwaran. They have since divorced.

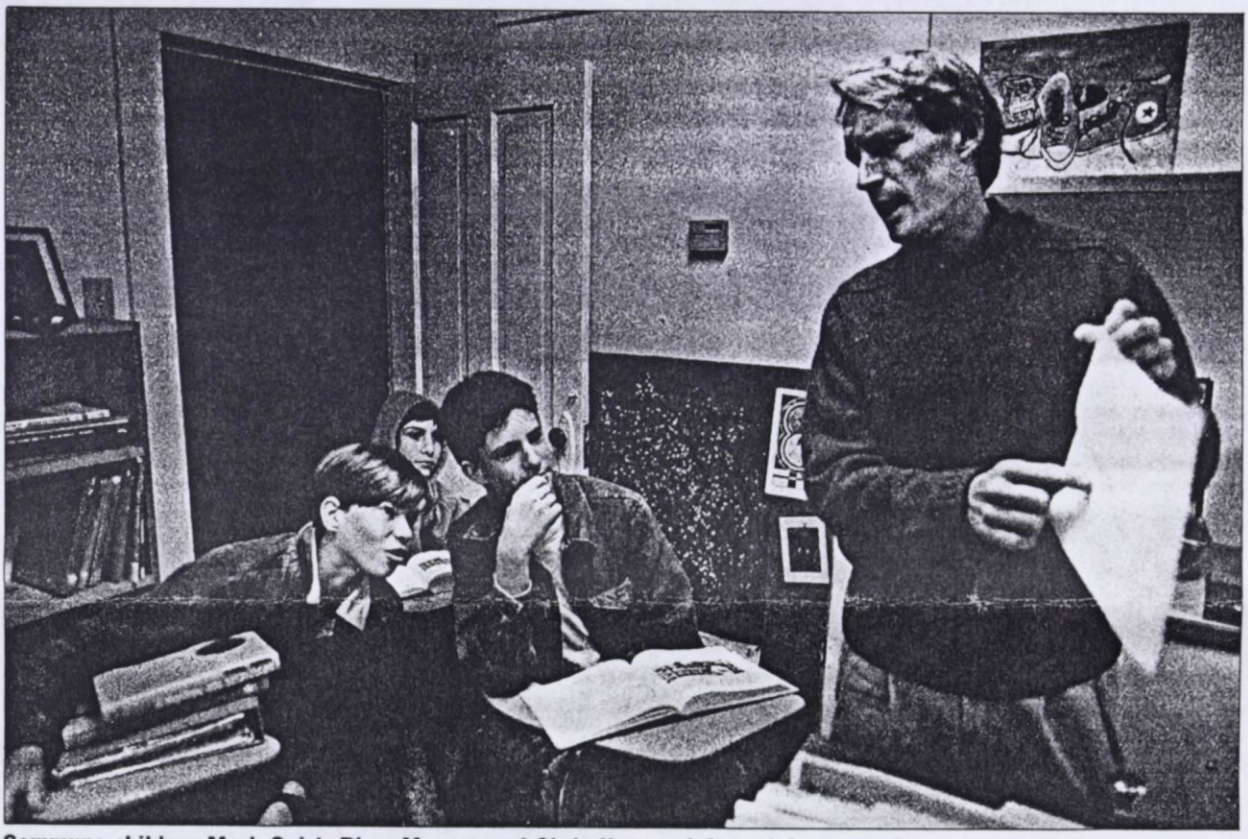
The crisis deepened when Easwaran told his wife, Christine, that he could not teach in this accusatory environment and was going back to India. Christine told the commune.

"It was blatantly manipulative; he was playing on people's worst fear," says Richard Applegate, a Ph.D. linguist who spent 15 years in the commune. "People got very panicked."

A meeting was held to discuss the charges. Loyalists claimed that the women who had made the charges were crazy. Others insisted that if Easwaran had done something, the reason was either spiritual—the most often-used rationale was, "He's on a different plane, we can't criticize him"—or else, "He was only trying to comfort the women."

"I stood up at a meeting and said, 'I don't care what Easwaran's done, he's my teacher,' " says Rod Weaver, who stayed through the crisis but left three years later. "The meeting came down to: Either you follow him and obey him and love him completely, or you leave."

Ramagiri is very much a Gandhian ashram, dedicated to non-violence. Yet violence was in the air. People who were considering leaving the commune were told they were making a mistake they would re-



Commune children Mark Quirt, Birru Morgan and Chris Harvey, left to right, study Spanish with Steve Ruppenthal.

gret until their dying days. They were told everything they touched in the world would turn to ashes. There was even a threat that Easwaran would retract their spiritual progress.

"I felt the boiling rage of potential physical violence," says Mary Lee Cole, who was one of Easwaran's star devotees from 1967 to 1983. "We were Judases for criticizing Easwaran. *No questioning was allowed.* It was so shocking. Ramagiri was my family. Overnight, my family saw me as a pariah. That's no family."

"If looks could kill, we'd be dead," adds Richard Applegate.

A dozen of the disciples, people who had dedicated their lives to following Easwaran's teachings for over 15 years, elected to leave. After so many years in a highly structured, secure community, the exiles felt they were walking naked into the world.

"For years before I left Ramagiri I fantasized about pouring out my story to one or two friends over and over and when they got so sick of it they'd say, 'Get away from us,' and then I'd fall into a suicidal depression and go kill myself," says Richard Applegate.

RAMAGIRI IS PURRING ALONG TODAY. Nilgiri Press is publishing new titles and Easwaran is attracting new disciples. The talks he gives at a church in Petaluma every Tuesday night draw people from all over the country. The loyalists who went through the upheaval are convinced that Easwaran did not fail the people who left, the exiles failed Easwaran.

"They gathered some superficial fruits,"

'I felt the boiling rage of potential physical violence,' says Mary Lee Cole. 'We were Judases for criticizing Easwaran. *No questioning was allowed.* It was so shocking. Ramagiri was my family. Overnight, my family saw me as a pariah. That's no family.'

says Terry Morrison, a former film maker who is head of Nilgiri Press. "The real tragedy is, I'm not so sure they can take with them what they've learned. There are limitations in what Easwaran can inspire in others. We're much more realistic now. We go day by day."

Their experience at Ramagiri was so intense that, six years after most of them left, people who left still see themselves as refugees who are trying to sort out the years they spent on the razor's edge. For some, it was a basically a positive experience. "I got a lot out of it," says Jeff Morse, a successful architect who spent 17 years at the commune. "There were incredible improvements in my concentration and ability to execute and turn out beautiful stuff."

For others, it was basically negative. "I feel betrayed by the whole experience," says Rod Weaver, who spent 18 years in Ramagiri. "There was so much crap in what Easwaran said, I have trouble sorting out the chaff from the grain. I don't even know what progress is anymore. All I know is, I'm not the same person, I'm a much better person. But that might just be growing up."

All the Ramagiri refugees left for pretty

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much the same reason: They ultimately found Easwaran stifling. He degenerated from a teacher to a father figure they neither needed nor wanted, and ultimately evolved into a guru whose authority was not to be questioned.

"If Easwaran had been in 1967 what he became, we never would have gotten involved," David Cole says. "He always told us that you have to do the traveling yourself, the teacher can only point the way. Over time, that changed. We were told that devotion to the teacher was what mattered. He said the time for doubts had passed; if we gave into doubts and temptations, we were lost."

The refugees report that Easwaran became involved in every personal decision, great and small, whether or not it had anything to do with spiritual matters. "He always encouraged me to seek his advice about a million things, really personal things like sex, child rearing, even jewelry," says Debbie Jernberg, who followed Easwaran for 15 years before leaving and entering nursing school. "He never said, 'I don't know, I'm just a spiritual teacher.' "

"Easwaran kept us under control by telling us we didn't know what we were doing, we had to come to him," Richard Applegate adds. "Meditation should sharpen discrimination, not decrease it. He wanted us to stay his children."

Far more galling to the refugees is the difference between what Easwaran claims to be and the way they *observed* him to be. Supposedly when you have broken through to God, you have no ego. You see divinity in all life, which is why Gandhi lived so humbly.

"When you have attained awareness of the Self [God], there is nothing more to be added to what you have," Easwaran says. "All that you want afterward is to give and share with others."

But Easwaran seems to want more. People in the East take off their shoes when they enter a holy place. At Ramagiri, people take off Easwaran's shoes for him when he enters a building where there are holy images. Laurel Robertson jumps through hoops to prepare food he will find appealing. A woman or two is always at his side, holding his elbow. They are there because he might have a spiritual experience and fall and hurt himself.

"Easwaran says he tried to be ordinary, but when you see him walking down the street with two women who are dressed to the teeth on either arm and a whole troop of people behind him, you realize that he wants attention, that he enjoys it," Rod Weaver says.

"The guy was better off when people weren't worshiping him," Jeff Morse adds. "In the early days, he had a certain humility; he would discourage people from thinking that he was a godlike being, and that was very becoming. At some point, he stopped being offended by people worshiping him. It has eroded his humanity. If you are someone who is worshiped, who are you going to get real with?"

Someone like Easwaran who has broken through to *samadhi* has supposedly transcended life's aches and pains, the depressions and anxieties that affect us all. Saturated with God's love for all things great and small, he is beyond life's little ups and downs. "I'm a person who doesn't know what being discouraged is," Easwaran says. He says he is free from "agitation. I have hardly any self-will."

But once again, the refugees say there is a vast difference between Easwaran's claims and his behavior. "He got really depressed after people left in '83," Debbie Jernberg says. "I know, I had to take him out three or four times a week and entertain him. The starch really went out of him, he became withdrawn."

EASWARAN'S LOYALISTS HAVE AN answer for all of his apparent contradictions. If Easwaran lets people take off his shoes, he is only offering people the chance to show their love. If he is fed an exotic diet, it is because his students want to do everything possible to keep him around for as long as possible. The refugees say the commune has become increasingly isolated; the loyalists are convinced the commune is firmly on the Buddha's middle path.

As evidence of their outreach into the world, the loyalists point to the Rise program. Rise is a 10-week program that teaches meditation to people who have AIDS and AIDS-related complex. The idea is that meditation gives AIDS sufferers a tool to deal with tremendous stress and helps them build spiritual, psychological and physical strength. These ideas are now being tested scientifically by doctors in Denver. The Rise program has no official connection to Ramagiri, but Easwaran serves as chief consultant. It has received glowing reviews from people who have been through it, but Ramagiri refugees are dubious about both its intentions and positive effects.

"There's nothing scientific about what they're doing," Rod Weaver says. "The program implies that meditation raises immune-system efficiency. There's not a shred of evidence anywhere that indicates that's the case. Their underlying assumption is, Easwaran says meditation will work and he knows, so all we have to do is prove it. They bend data all over the place."

"I have a phenomenal amount of anger about that program," adds Richard Applegate, who is gay. "I know a

Richard Applegate, Debbie Jernberg and Rod Weaver, left to right, are three who left Ramagiri.

lot of people who have died of AIDS. My feeling is, any human benefit that comes out of it is secondary to putting Easwaran's way on the map. His goal has always been to add another chapter to the medical books, called 'Meditation.' "

After years of meditating up to four hours a day, only a few of the Ramagiri refugees still practice the discipline. Some, like Rod Weaver, question its efficacy. "I don't know what intense concentration does," he says. "Easwaran says meditation is the only drug with no serious side effects. That's a bunch of malarkey. It has serious side effects. I've seen it make dysfunctional people more dysfunctional."

Others, like Mary Lee Cole, had breakthrough experiences that changed the way they view life. "It's given me a tremendous strength and a detachment that are extremely valuable," Cole says about her experiences in meditation.

The thing that still rankles the refugees is the way they were treated during the crisis of 1983, and the way they have been treated since. In theory, Ramagiri is a spiritual community dedicated to making love work. In practice, the refugees say, loving one another came down to being "nice," to swallowing the anger that is inevitable when people work closely together. Anger was taken as evidence of a lack of progress along the spiritual path. Instead of confronting one another, people went for a brisk walk and recited the mantra. But if you don't deal with your anger, if you don't confront people who are bothering you, you don't grow.

"There was no vehicle for expressing anger, for processing it, for understanding it," Rod Weaver says. "In Easwaran's book, anger is overblown self-will. The idea that anger might come out of hurt or fear or boundary issues was foreign to him. He's very, very unsophisticated psychologically."

MOST SOPHISTICATED RE-ligious thinkers believe that doubt is not separate from faith; it is a part of faith. Without doubt, there can be no leap of faith. Yet during the crisis at Ramagiri, doubt was considered heresy. Easwaran's loyalists condemned doubters instead of trying to understand them. Things were black or white; if you were not totally loyal to Easwaran, there was no place for you at Ramagiri.

The refugees and the loyalists worked side by side for almost 20 years, sharing everything from food to the deepest spiritual beliefs. One of the cornerstones of Easwaran's teachings is "putting others first." And yet, very few of the loyalists have ever called to see how their old friends are making out in the big bad world. It's as if the refugees died the day they left the commune. Debbie Jernberg and her husband divorced soon after she left Ramagiri. Her son still lives there with his father, and plays soccer on a team that has a number of kids from the commune. When she goes to the games, people from Ramagiri ignore her.

"The biggest burn is being rejected for not believing what the group believed," Jeff Morse says. "It's at the heart of their principles to allow people their beliefs. When their principles were tested, they violated them. They haven't learned anything."

The loyalists also regard the exodus as a test, but not in the same way the refugees do. To them, the exodus was a test of their will, of their ability to overcome obstacles along the razor's edge. They are in for the long haul, a lifelong search for God. The people who left just did not have it to go the distance.

"If we at Ramagiri were to start dwelling on doubts and yielding to anger, we would have less vitality for our work," Steve Ruppenthal says. "The goal is to realize God. To do that you have to subordinate yourself to a teacher, and after many years, they no longer wanted Easwaran to have authority over their lives. They'd had it with the spiritual path at this level of intensity. They all knew they'd made great gains that will never go to waste. It didn't take them long to find their way in the world. If you can make it at Ramagiri, you can make it anywhere."

Ultimately, the split between the Ramagiri loyalists and the refugees comes down to the age-old argument over whether you can make spiritual progress in the world. The loyalists are adamant in their belief that you must partly withdraw from the world and place yourself in the hands of an enlightened teacher. "Boredom goes out of life; every second becomes an adventure," Laurel Robertson says of life in Ramagiri. "Living here is so intense. It's wonderful to watch people grow."

"Leaving was healthy," counters Debbie Jernberg. "When I was there, I figured everything I was doing was right because I was there. Now I have to ask myself if what I'm doing is right or wrong. I'm in charge of my life, taking responsibility for my actions. That to me is much more spiritual than anything I was doing at Ramagiri."

The argument over whether you must withdraw from the world to make spiritual progress is as unending as the search for God itself.

There is no doubt that Eknath Easwaran has made a major contribution to that search. Anyone interested in meditation, Hinduism, Buddhism or Gandhi would do well to read his books. But perhaps Easwaran's most basic mistake was in choosing young students. In India, people who dedicate their lives to following the spiritual life take a vow of *sannyas*, of renunciation. Traditionally, the vow is taken by men in their late 50s or early 60s who have raised families and completed careers. They are fully formed human beings whom life has tested. The people who joined Easwaran were, for the most part, over-educated kids who, says Richard Applegate, "decided to short-circuit and go from being egotistic slobs to being saints."

To be a saint, you must first know who you are.

"We were told to abandon everything in the self that isn't absolutely pure," says Applegate, the linguist. "I started making up a language when I was a teen-ager and by the time I got to Ramagiri, I had boxes of material. I put them in the trash. I was trying to kill who I was. When I drove out of Ramagiri for the last time, I looked in the rearview mirror and said to myself, 'I think I'll find out who Richard is before I try to kill him.' "

JOHN HUBNER is a staff writer for West.